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Viewing cable 08ATHENS966, GREECE/TURKEY - NEXT STEPS ON NATO AEGEAN EXERCISES

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08ATHENS966	2008-07-07 13:31	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Athens

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OO RUEHWEB

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2116
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ATHENS 000966

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

SIPDIS

DEPT ALSO FOR EUR/RPM AND EUR/SE
USNATO ALSO FOR MILDEL

REF: A. ATHENS 678

[B. ATHENS](#) 721

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel V. Speckhard for 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[¶11.](#) (C) In the aftermath of NATO's May 2008 decision not to support a Greek exercise that would overfly the island of Agios Efstratios (AE)(ref A), the Greeks are considering developing a new exercise that would again seek to overfly the island. Various Greek contacts have told us that they believe the United States recommendation to the NATO SG not/not to support the May exercise, due to Turkish threats to intercept Greek aircraft flying under NATO command and control, was the decisive factor in withdrawal of NATO air support. We have told our Greek interlocutors that our understanding of what transpired is quite different, and that the authority to provide support or deny support for an exercise rests solely with NATO authorities. Visiting CC-AIR Commander Lt Gen Lee McFann, Commander, NATO Air Component, Izmir (U.S.) emphatically told Greek civilian and military interlocutors that this issue is a "political problem" and that Greek officials must take the matter up with NATO political authorities. We are telling the Greeks that before proposing a new exercise they need to ensure that NATO SYG de Hoop Scheffer has issued clear, written assurances that he will allow the exercise to proceed. We are also advising the Greeks not to force the issue by rescheduling the exercise absent such assurances from de Hoop Scheffer, otherwise they are headed for a repeat performance. The Greeks are attempting to make this a U.S. problem; we shouldn't let them do so. End Summary.

Agios Efstratios - Recent History

[¶12.](#) (SBU) Although the Turks and Greeks have long disagreed about the status of certain islands in the Aegean (ref A) the question of the status of the island of Agios Efstratios (AE) was first raised in the year 2000 when Turkey raised questions related to AE's status in the course of planning for a NATO exercise, "Destined Glory 2000." Prior to that date, we are aware of no suggestions that it was anything other than Greek sovereign territory with the same status as the rest of Greek territory, i.e. with no demilitarized status. We are aware that Turkey argues that AE can be tied to treaties pre-dating the Lausanne Convention that would suggest it may be demilitarized.

[¶13.](#) (C) In 2007, Greece sought NATO support for a training exercise "Noble Archer," that included the Limnos Terminal Military Area (TMA) as well as AE. (Limnos, unlike Agios Efstratios, is specifically mentioned in the treaties whose interpretation is disputed by our two Allies). After review, NATO did not support the exercise, as Limnos has long been the subject of a Greek/Turkish dispute (Greece claims that the Montreux Convention amended Lausanne provisions allowing Greece to "remilitarize" Limnos and Turkey has long challenged this claim), and NATO policy has long been to avoid exercises related to Limnos. Following cancellation of the exercise, the Greeks expressed concern that its cancellation could be construed also to support the more recent Turkish claims related to AE. This led the United States to do two things:

-- Then-U/S Nick Burns made a public statement standing next to Greek FM Bakoyannis that the United States considered AE to be Greek territory, that the U.S. has the impression it is not demilitarized, and that this is an issue for NATO to

review to see if it can reach an arrangement to allow such military exercises to proceed (ref A).

-- Privately, U.S. officials in Washington and Athens pressed the Greeks to raise Greek concerns with NATO officials -- civilian and military.

14. (C) Greece then took our advice and consulted with NATO authorities. On the military side, the Greek Commander of CAOC 7 and other Greek military representatives were in frequent touch with NATO officials at CC-AIR Izmir (including a number of U.S. military officers) and SACEUR to lay out their intentions to develop an exercise that excluded Limnos and included Agios Efstratios. In the course of these consultations, the Greeks believe they received assurances that such an exercise -- if it followed all of the detailed NATO requirements for Aegean exercises -- would be approved. On the civilian side, we understand that the Greek Ambassador to NATO met with various officials in Brussels, including Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer in December 2007, to make the same points. The Greeks also believe that de Hoop Scheffer expressed willingness to allow an exercise that overflew AE to go forward provided it did not touch on disputed areas and met all of the other criteria for Aegean exercise support. The Greeks believe they planned an exercise that met this criteria. However, at no time in this process was any official NATO guidance issued on the subject.

Greek Suspicions of U.S. Role

15. (C) When NATO authorities informed the Greeks that they would not support "Noble Archer" this year the Greeks were deeply frustrated (refs). Various contacts in the Greek MFA, MOD and Prime Minister's office have told us that they understand NATO Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer took this decision only after consulting with the United States and that the United States had recommended not/not approving the exercise due to Turkish threats to intercept the Greek aircraft flying under NATO AWACS command and control. Various contacts -- including the Chief of the Hellenic Air Force, the Director of the MFA NATO Office, the Diplomatic advisor to the Minister of Defense, and the Deputy Diplomatic Advisor to the Prime Minister -- have told us that they believe the United States stopped this exercise. They cite as sources the Secretary General's office and the other Missions to NATO consulted by the SYG.

16. (C) We have responded that we have a very different understanding of these events. Either SACEUR or the Secretary General of NATO could have approved this exercise without any consultations with the United States. However, the Secretary General chose not to exercise his inherent authority, and to solicit our advice, presumably because he had doubts about the wisdom of proceeding. We are telling the Greeks that if Greece is unhappy with the outcome of this process, it needs to take up its concerns with the NATO Secretary General and with SACEUR, and not/not with the United States. We will continue to make this point, but we have thus far been unable to alter the Greek conclusion that the U.S., as a disproportionately strong force within NATO, is the ultimate obstacle to proceeding.

17. (C) During a June 30 to July 2 visit to Athens NATO CC-AIR Commander Lt Gen McFann (U.S.) was direct with Greek interlocutors that this is a "political problem" and that Greece needs to address it by consulting with NATO political authorities. He also recommended that Greece seek written guidance from NATO political authorities before pressing any further for NATO support for any activity overflying AE (or any other Aegean area under dispute).

18. (C) During LTG McFann's July 1 meeting with Constantinos Bitsios, Deputy Diplomatic Adviser to the PM, the DCM strongly emphasized to Bitsios:

-- The participation (or not) of a NATO AWACS during the 90 second overflight of A.E. by Greek fighters would have zero significance for the military preparedness of either Greece or NATO.

-- Despite the popular perception in both Athens and Ankara, no one else believes that NATO is the referee in these arguments.

-- Any action NATO takes, or does not take, on these exercises will have zero real impact on the eventual resolution of Aegean issues.

DCM urged Greece not to set itself up for another disappointment by rescheduling the exercise since, as we have just seen, the best-laid plans can have unpredictable results. Nor should Athens focus on the .S. as the source of its problems, as Athens and Washington already have enough difficult issues to deal with in the real world. Bitsios was utterly unconvinced, and remained focused on: Greece's "right" to conduct such an exercise; a domino theory of constantly expanding "o-go" zones imposed by Turkey; and his belief that the U.S. has the dominant voice in decisions taken by the NATO SG.

Greek Concerns about an Elastic "No Fly" Area

¶9. (C) We have heard Bitsios' concerns from virtually all interlocutors at the MOD, the General Staff, and the MFA. The Greeks assert that the Turks are seeking to extend their concept of a "grey zone" where NATO does not exercise in an effort to build support for Turkish claims in the Aegean. The standard Greek talking point is if the Turks can simply claim AE as a "disputed area," why can't they claim Athens or Thessaloniki? The Greek refrain is that the practical effort of NATO "neutrality" in such situations is to favor Turkish claims in the Aegean. We push back, noting that NATO is not an arbitrator in the zero-sum Aegean game, and that whether NATO exercises or not above a given island will have no practical effect on any eventual solution of Aegean issues, but that we also agree that specious claims - when they are truly specious - should not be countenanced.

Next Steps - Embassy Athens' Recommendations

¶10. (C) The Greeks have intimated that they want to try again to develop an exercise that would overfly AE (and the Greek press have reported that NATO SG de Hoop Scheffer gave positive signals in this regard on the margins of the recent Defense Ministerial). We intend to give them the same advice that we gave last year with an addition: like last year, we are telling the Greeks to proceed carefully in developing any such exercise, and to consult closely with NATO military and civilian officials every step of the way. However, we are also telling the Greeks that before they even start the process, they need to ensure that NATO SYG de Hoop Scheffer has issued clear, written assurances that he will allow the exercise to proceed. Absent such assurances from de Hoop Scheffer, we are advising the Greeks not to force the issue, as the only possible outcome will be another failed exercise and further frustrations.

¶11. (C) The Greeks are already countering that de Hoop Scheffer will not provide the necessary assurances absent signals from the U.S. that it supports such an exercise. They are likely to press in Washington, Brussels, and here in Athens for the U.S. to tell de Hoop Scheffer to let such an exercise go forward. We recommend that our response be simply to refer to Greeks back to the Secretary General as this is not/not a U.S. issue. The NATO Secretary General has the authority to provide guidance to NATO military authorities, and we should not prejudge the advice we will provide to him at any given time. The Greeks are trying to make this a U.S. problem; we shouldn't let them -- as this

issue should remain firmly in NATO's corridors.
SPECKHARD